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Retired astronaut and Navy Capt. James A. Lovell has earned countless accolades during his distinguished career and in the years since he left military service.

A blockbuster movie was even made about his most famous mission, the ill-fated Apollo 13 flight to the moon.

But it was a groundbreaking ceremony Monday morning in North Chicago that had the biggest impact on his wife, Marilyn.

She dabbed at tears as Lovell, of Lake Forest, and other dignitaries celebrated the pending construction of the Capt. James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center, the first-ever joint Navy and Veterans Administration hospital.

"Jim has received many, many awards since flying his greatest space mission, but today has hit me the most emotionally," Marilyn Lovell explained. "I can't believe that his name is going to be on this hospital."

Set to open in 2010, the facility will be the nation's first joint Veterans Affairs/Navy hospital, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park. It will be on the grounds of the North Chicago VA Medical Center, which will merge with the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station's hospital to create the new facility.

"I'm superbly happy," Lovell said of the project. "I think this is a great idea."

When completed, the Lovell Center will serve an estimated 100,000 veterans, active-duty recruits or troops and civilian relatives annually. Plans call for the Navy facility to be demolished the following year.

Lovell was among several dignitaries who spoke to a crowd of about 400 during Monday's ceremony, which was staged in a recently completed parking garage built for the new hospital.

A ribbon-cutting event was held for the garage, too.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park, Deputy Veterans Affairs Secretary Gordon Mansfield and Principal Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Stephen Jones also addressed the crowd, honored Lovell and praised the long-planned partnership between the VA and Navy.

"We have here a unique historical opportunity," said Rear Admiral Donald Gintzig, deputy commander of Navy Medicine East. "It's about working together to deliver the best care possible."

The VA's Mansfield said his agency and the Navy must evolve if they want to "deliver world-class health care to those who have earned it."

Like Lovell and his space missions, the agencies are "going somewhere new and different," Mansfield said.

Lovell is best known for commanding the 1970 Apollo 13 flight, which suffered a crippling malfunction in space but returned safely to Earth. He also was a Navy test pilot and combat pilot whose decorations include two Navy Distinguished Flying Crosses and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The first phase of the \$130 million project includes the parking garage, a new hospital entrance and an ambulatory care center.

The project is particularly remarkable for the fact that, not even a decade ago, a VA report recommended significant service reductions at the hospital.

Kirk, himself a combat veteran, and other advocates fought to save the center and developed plans to merge services there with the nearby Navy hospital.

"This culminates almost a decade of work to save veterans' health care in Illinois," Kirk said.

On Monday, Kirk suggested that a copy of the infamous VA report be buried beneath the future Lovell center.